LINGUISTIC PRACTISES IN A TOURISM-DRIVEN CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

“Everything is completely upside down!” exclaims my Icelandic friend as she returns to the car after paying for the fuel and buying a few groceries at the petrol station. She explains that, out of habit, she addressed the cashier in English; they exchanged a few words before realizing that they were, in fact, both Icelandic, and then continued their conversation in Icelandic. “Can you imagine… it's still crazy when you think about it” she sighs. I understand her reaction and find myself equally struck by the situation. This scene seems difficult for me to imagine in a familiar context such as France, where I am from. Yet it is ultimately my Icelandic friend's reaction that prompts me to reflect: what does it, at its core, say about this situation? By describing the situation as being “completely upside down”, she seems to suggest that an implicit linguistic norm – the use of Icelandic between Icelandic speakers – has somehow been overturned here. In this anecdote, English is used first rather than Icelandic, precisely because my Icelandic friend had become accustomed to speaking English more often. The situation therefore appears paradoxical: although she describes it as “crazy” (somehow “not normal”), it is her own everyday habit, shaped by the increasingly frequent use of English in her daily life in Iceland, that led her to address the cashier in this language. This scene suggests that something in linguistic practices might be changing in Iceland and deserves closer attention. Reflecting on it, I realized that I had already encountered similar remarks and situations without paying them much attention. I began to consider this as a potentially interesting topic for anthropological research, particularly in a rural municipality such as Hornafjörður. Through ordinary interactions and everyday observations, I gradually became aware that the place of English in Icelandic society raised questions that could not be understood without first considering the country's linguistic history and its broader sociolinguistic context.

Linguistic Stability Under Pressure in Iceland

Iceland is characterized by a remarkable degree of linguistic stability: the Icelandic language has changed very little since the Settlement of Iceland nearly eleven centuries ago (Leonard, 2011). This stability can partly be explained by the country's geographical isolation, but above all by Iceland’s language policy that adopts a protectionist stance and promote the image of a “pure” language that has remained “uncontaminated by foreign

influence" (Þórarinsdóttir, 2011). The emergence of Icelandic nationalism during the nineteenth century further reinforced this linguistic purism, particularly in opposition to Danish, the language associated with several centuries of political dependence on the Kingdom of Denmark. Within the context of Danish rule, Icelandic was extensively romanticized and reified for socio-political purposes (Kristinsson & Árnarson, 2024) as the original language of the Viking Age, extending seventeenth-century humanist conceptions that regarded it as the indigenous language of all Scandinavian peoples during the Middle Ages (Hálfdanarson, 2006). The ideal of preserving Icelandic as close as possible to its historical form has continued to shape Icelandic political discourse for many decades (Hálfdanarson, 2006). This policy has been widely supported by Icelanders who take great pride in their language (Hólmarsdóttir, 2001). As Leonard (2011) notes,

> "A linguistic norm came to serve the whole of Iceland; the society was virtually monodialectal and was characterized by long-term linguistic homogeneity. This norm-maintenance over time has gained social meaning and emerged ultimately as an Icelandic linguistic identity."

One of the most frequently cited illustrations of this linguistic continuity is that Icelanders are still able to read medieval literature (Albury, 2024), particularly the Icelandic sagas in a language that has undergone very little change since that time. Iceland's literary and linguistic heritage has therefore come to be widely regarded as a central symbol of national identity (Kristinsson & Árnarson, 2024). In line with the principle that the nation is embodied in its language (Thiesse, 1999), Icelanders regard their language as a precious asset and an essential component of their identity that must be firmly protected (Hólmarsdóttir, 2001). In other words, the idea persists in Iceland that language functions as a cultural symbol through which the Icelandic people constitute themselves as a nation (Þórarinsdóttir, 2011). Icelandic language ideology thus rests upon this dual legacy: not only preserving a language that distinguishes Iceland from other nations, but also guarding it as close as possible to its original form, free from any form of "foreign pollution" (Hálfdanarson, 2006):

> "And this became, in fact, the governing attitude toward linguistic development in Iceland – that is, Icelanders were not only to maintain their distinctive tongue, but their language was to be conserved in its pristine form and cleansed of outside influences."

However, this linguistic stability is now being put to the test. The era of globalization, so characteristic of the contemporary world, has been accompanied by the worldwide spread of English, a phenomenon from which Iceland has not been immune[1]. English exerts a considerable influence on the global linguistic environment, and its growing power and dominance have generated recurring debates in academic, political, and media domains across many countries, including Iceland. There, concerns have been expressed that English – as the language of globalization – may threaten the vitality of the Icelandic language (Þórarinsdóttir, 2011; Albury, 2014). The growing presence of English in Iceland is particularly evident in higher education, where a substantial proportion of teaching materials are written in English and many degree programmes are taught in that language (Þórarinsdóttir, 2011). It is also increasingly visible in the workplace, especially in internationally oriented service sectors, where English tends to function as *the lingua franca* (Albury, 2014), as well as in the media and cultural sphere, which are heavily shaped by English-language content. Consequently, English occupies an increasingly prominent place in Icelandic society.

Among the many manifestations of globalization, the intensification of human mobility plays a central role, particularly through the expansion of tourism and the migration flows associated with it[2]. It is now widely acknowledged that the study of tourism falls within the broader study of mobility in a globalized world (Doquet & Evrard, 2008). In other words, tourism, understood as a "total social fact", provides a legitimate entry point for studying migration (Cousin & Apchain, 2016), for instance by examining the flows of seasonal workers and migrant populations within this broader context. Furthermore, it is also widely acknowledged that migration affects languages, sometimes contributing to the emergence of dominant languages (Dixon, 1997). The increase in these flows fundamentally increases the number of interactions in which English is used as a common language, that is, a means of communication. In this context, English can be understood as the language of tourists and immigrant populations and thus appears to be used as a *lingua*

[1] See in particular Albury (2014). In this article, Albury devotes a section entitled "*English and Globalization in Iceland*" to examining the spread of English at different levels of Icelandic society.

[2] Iceland joined the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1994. Alongside the process of globalization, Iceland's membership in the EEA, based on the principle of free movement, has played an important role in opening the country's borders in many senses (Þórarinsdóttir, 2011).

franca primarily in interactions that necessarily involve these groups, either among themselves or with Icelandic-speaking local populations.

Over approximately the past twenty years, Iceland has experienced both an acceleration and a diversification of human mobility. The total number of foreign visitors staying at least one night in Iceland increased from approximately 360,000 in 2004 to nearly one million in 2014, reaching just under 2.3 million in both 2024 and 2025[1]. During the same period, immigrants accounted for approximately 19% of Iceland's total population in 2025, compared with only 9% in 2016[2]. As Þórarinsdóttir (2011) observes,

> "(…) after the turn of the millennium, the country has undergone radical changes due to a sudden and unprecedented surge in immigration. (…) The most important magnet for this increase was the increasing demand for labour caused by the economic growth. The presence of immigrants has altered the linguistic landscape."

Indeed, Kristinsson (2014) argues that in the mid-1990s, immigrants accounted for less than 2% of Iceland's population, while Icelandic was the mother tongue of most of the population. Today, as previously noted, approximately 19% of Iceland's nearly 400,000 inhabitants are immigrants who speak more than one hundred different languages and whose proficiency in Icelandic as a second language varies considerably (Kristinsson, 2024). The growing presence of foreign populations, whether immigrants settling in the country or tourists staying temporarily, fundamentally reshapes Iceland's linguistic landscape and requires Icelandic society to adapt. Although English is not replacing Icelandic, it is increasingly being added to it, giving rise to questions and debates within Icelandic society. The place of English has therefore become a significant social issue in contemporary Iceland, reflecting the country's long-standing and passionate concern for its language (Albury, 2014).

[1] See *Ferðamálastofa* (The Icelandic Tourist Board), https://www.ferdamalastofa.is/en/recearch-and-statistics/numbers-of-foreign-visitors#overnight-visitors-all-entry-points, accessed 6 August 2026.

[2] See *Hagstofa* Íslands (Statistics Iceland), https://statice.is/statistics/population/inhabitants/background/, accessed 6 August 2026.

The genesis of the research project

The simultaneous increase in tourist and migration flows invites an examination of their effects on linguistic practices. These questions resonate with my own position, which is, in this respect, illustrative: having been motivated to move abroad by a professional opportunity in the tourism sector, I now live in a country whose language I have not yet fully mastered and thus find myself among those foreigners who has been using English a lot, particularly when interacting with Icelandic-speaking locals in the public sphere.

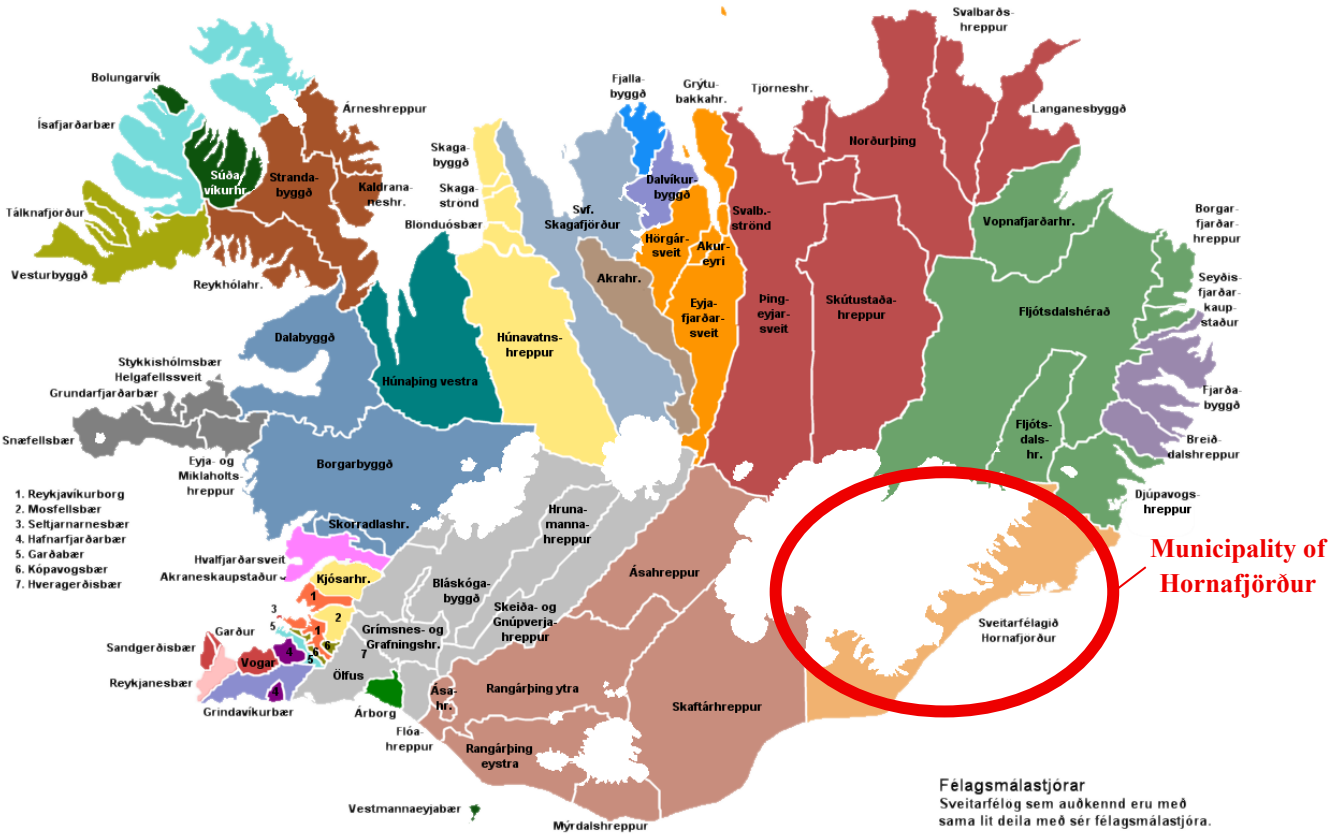
I arrived in Iceland in March 2023, in Höfn í Hornafirði, to work in a family-run guesthouse. Since then, I have found myself in the position of a foreigner, observing and learning, while gradually establishing a life here. At the same time, I resumed my studies through a distance-learning programme at the University of Strasbourg (France), graduating with a bachelor's degree in Anthropology in 2025. I am currently completing a Master's degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology, also by distance learning, which is expected to conclude in the summer of 2027. I have now finished working at the guesthouse and currently hold a position at Gamlabúð, the information and cultural centre in Höfn. The idea behind this project for *Nýsköpunarsjóðs námsmanna* emerged both from my anthropological training and from my long-term settlement in the municipality of Hornafjörður. Indeed, as my studies progressed alongside my everyday life in Iceland, I began to look at ordinary situations through an anthropological lens. This immersion in local social life naturally led me to adopt a position of participant observation, like an ethnographer in the field. Through ordinary interactions and everyday observations, I became more aware of questions surrounding the coexistence of Icelandic and English.

As illustrated by the situation described in the introduction, I heard remarks expressing both the observation and the concern that English was becoming more prominent in Iceland's linguistic landscape. At first, my own position as a foreigner did not lead me to fully appreciate these concerns. On the contrary, English enabled me to communicate and make myself understood despite my still limited command of Icelandic, and I therefore perceived its widespread use as something positive. As these observations accumulated, alongside my own process of integration, I came to realize that, although English is not replacing Icelandic, its growing presence may nevertheless be perceived as a threat and may contribute to the idea of a (real or imagined) marginalization of the Icelandic language. As Albury notes (2014),

> "The community worries that the local prominence of English as a global force is detrimental to the health of Icelandic – their own small but ancient language. Even worse, fears are expressed that English may take over, inspiring a flurry of imperatives to stop English in its tracks."

Rather than asking myself whether these concerns were justified, I became interested in understanding how Icelandic residents themselves perceived this situation. How often and in which circumstances do they use English? How do they describe the growing presence of English? How do they experience and negotiate these linguistic changes in their everyday lives? What meanings do they attach to them, and what emotions do they evoke? It is from these questions that my anthropological interest in language use emerged, and that the idea for this project took shape.

Hornafjörður: A Local Context for Exploring Linguistic Practices



Map of Icelandic municipalities (sveitarfélög) © Stjórnarráð Íslands, 2026.

This project focuses on the municipality of Hornafjörður, where the coexistence of Icelandic and English seems to be particularly visible in everyday life. The municipality is located in a popular area in south-eastern Iceland, at the foot of Vatnajökull. Its location makes Hornafjörður not only a major tourist destination but also a centre of employment in the tourism industry that attracts a large foreign workforce.

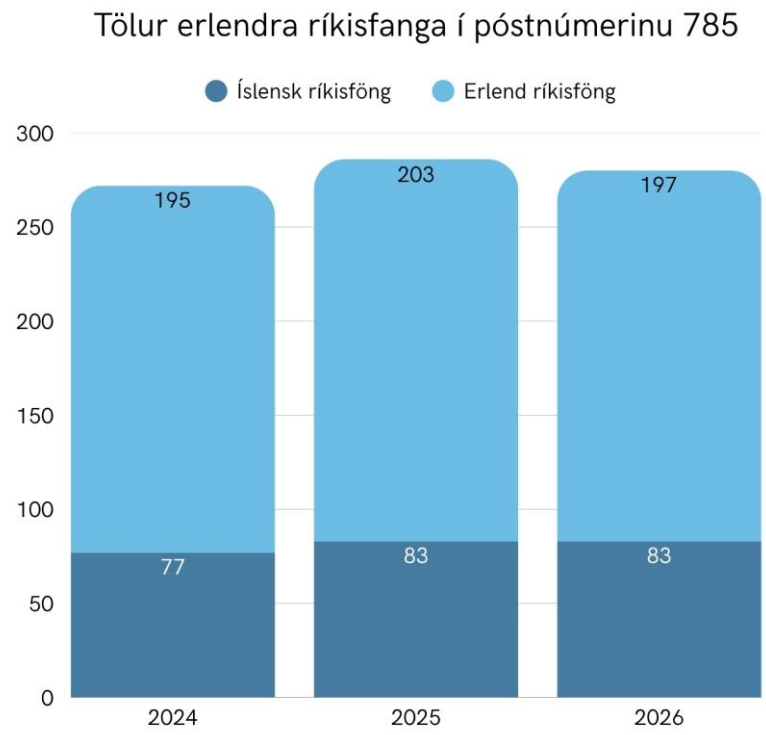
According to census data provided to me by the municipality[1], as of 1 March 2026, Hornafjörður counts 2,842 inhabitants and is currently organized around the town of Höfn with 1,916 inhabitants, which serves as the municipality's administrative centre. Outside Höfn, the rest of the municipal territory consists of a rural area structured into five counties, or *sveitir*: Lón, Nes, Mýrar, Suðursveit, and Öræfi. This spatial organization is reflected in the structure of the postal codes. The town of Höfn has its own postal code, 780. The rural areas of Nes, Lón, Mýrar, and Suðursveit are under the same postal code, 781, while the more remote area of Öræfi constitutes a separate postal entity, identified by postal code 785.

Map of the municipality of Hornafjörður, showing the five *sveitir* of Lón, Nes, Mýrar, Suðursveit, and Öræfi, as well as Höfn.

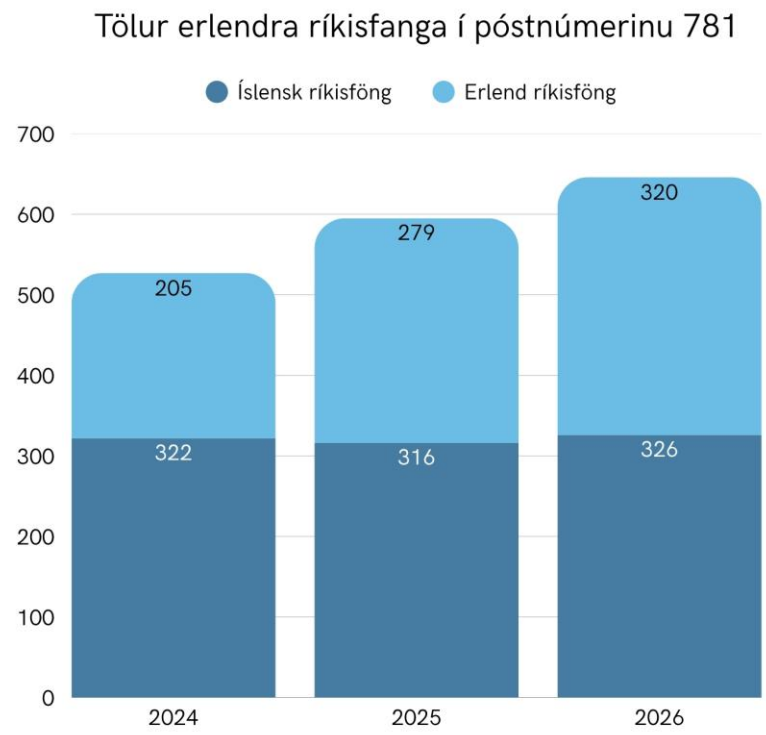
In the context of this research, it should be noted that I use the data provided by the municipality, which are based on Þjóðskrá (the National Registry), rather than data from Hagstofa Íslands (Statistics Iceland), as the two sources present differing figures. So far, I

[1] Data provided by Anna Birna Elvarsdóttir, Verkefnastjóri fjölmenningar-, inngildingar- og jafnréttismála (project manager of multicultural and quality matters), August 2026.

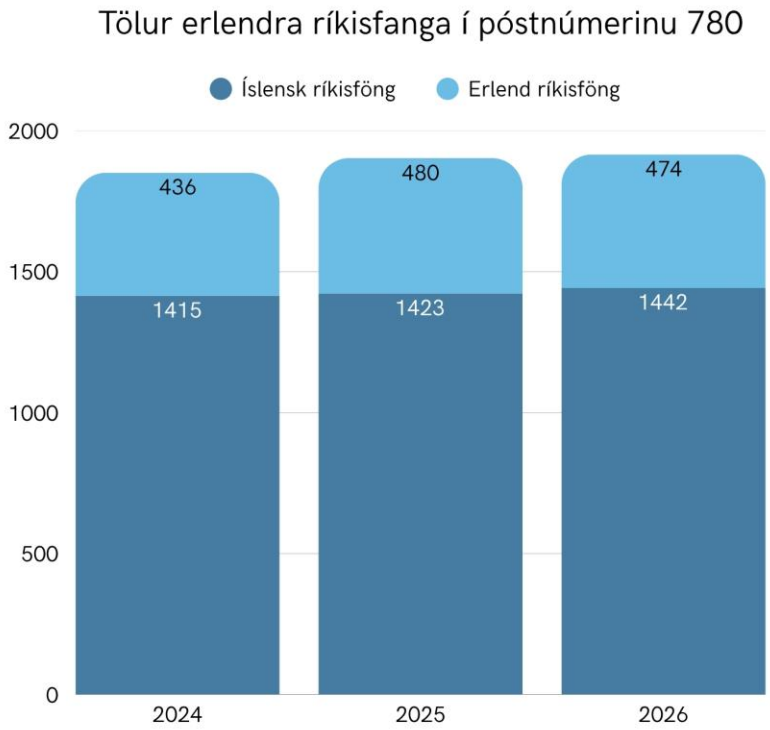
have been unable to get an explanation for this discrepancy. In 2025, nearly one-third of the municipality's residents (34.58%) are foreign nationals. In 2026, as of now, foreign nationals represent 34.83% of the municipality's total registered population. Thus, of the 2,842 inhabitants recorded across the municipality of Hornafjörður on 1 March 2026, 991 were foreign nationals. In a small-scale community, this seems to me to constitute a considerable proportion, particularly as this percentage has continued to increase, reaching 31.55% in 2024. More importantly, this percentage is significantly higher than the national figure, as discussed above, with foreign nationals accounting for approximately 19% of the total population in 2025. Furthermore, an analysis of the distribution of residents of foreign origin and nationality within the municipality itself reveals marked contrasts. The proportion of residents holding foreign nationality reaches approximately 70% in Öræfi county corresponding to postal code 785, compared with nearly 50% in the rural areas grouped under postal code 781, namely and only 25% in the town of Höfn (780). These characteristics make Hornafjörður a particularly relevant field site for examining how tourism, migration and linguistic practices intersect in everyday life. Moreover, working at this local scale makes it possible to explore the lived experiences of residents.



Foreign residents in postal code 785 © https://eystrahorn.is/tolfraedi-erlendra-ibua/, May 7th, 2026.



Foreign residents in postal code 781 © https://eystrahorn.is/tolfraedi-erlendra-ibua/, May 7th, 2026.



Foreign residents in postal code 780 © https://eystrahorn.is/tolfraedi-erlendra-ibua/, May 7th, 2026.

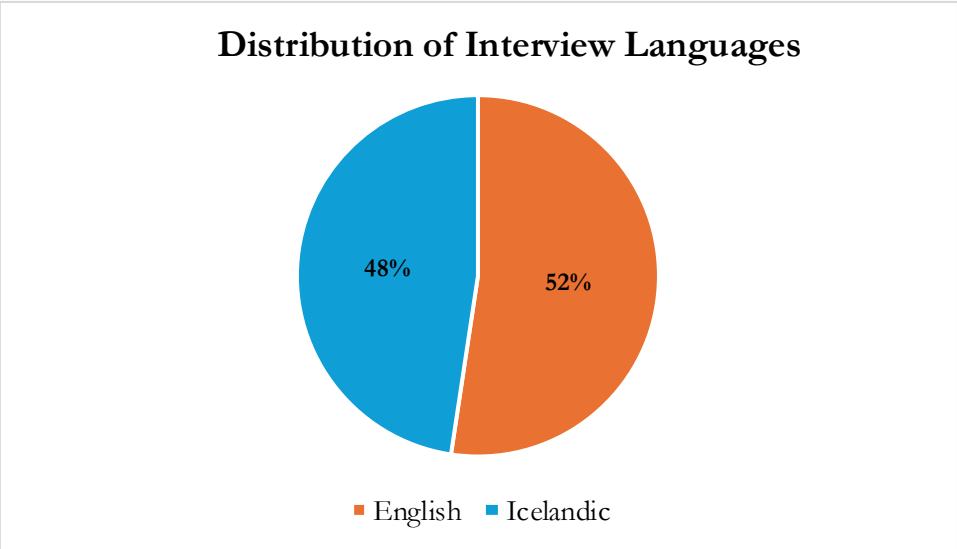
METHODOLOGY

Reflexive approach

My position as a foreigner in Iceland, benefiting from a rapidly expanding labor market in the tourism sector, places me at the very heart of the linguistic issue I seek to examine here. As I do not yet fully master the Icelandic language (which I continue to learn), I mostly use English daily in my interactions, which directly situates me within the practices that this research's project aims to observe and analyze. It is therefore necessary for me to continually reflect on the implications and effects of my positionality on my relationships with this research's participants. It is important to explain from where I speak and to acknowledge any individual bias as a condition of scientific rigor. Discussing the place of English in Icelandic society (and more specifically within the municipality of Hornafjörður) with an interlocutor (myself) who herself uses it may influence the discourses collected. From this perspective, it appears essential, as far as possible, to articulate the discourses collected during interviews – while distinguishing what participants say about what they think (opinions, subjective viewpoints) from what they do (personal experiences, lived realities) – with the practices that I am able to observe (participant observation). By acknowledging that my project emerges from my settlement in Iceland and, in part, from my personal experience, I do not claim an illusory value neutrality (Max Weber, 1959) but rather assume a situated involvement. This involvement should not, of course, be equated with taking sides in favor of a particular group or position. Rigorous research seeks to take complexity into account, assuming the ambiguity of intervention and its contradictions without being satisfied with them.

As I began to mention my research project to those around me, several reactions emerged, in the form of questions such as: "but do you intend to conduct your research in English?" or "how do you plan to communicate with Icelandic residents who do not speak English at all?". These remarks highlight, if not a limitation, a central methodological issue: interactions conducted in English restricts access to interlocutors who are proficient in this language. This difficulty in fully mastering Icelandic constitutes a significant obstacle. As Ushma Chauhan Jacobsen (2023) points out in her own research in Greenland, her inability to speak Kalaallisut – and therefore using English in her interactions with

indigenous – "is both haunting and methodologically problematic," insofar as it hinders access to rich and meaningful details. From the outset of this project, I did not know how to offer my interlocutors the possibility of choosing the language in which they would prefer to communicate with me. My lack of confidence prevented me from imagining interaction in Icelandic. Although I had prepared my interview guide in both languages, English and Icelandic, I did not envisage conducting the interviews myself in Icelandic and initially considered relying on a translator or interpreter to assist me. Eventually, if my initial interviews for this project were conducted in English, I subsequently decided to conduct them in Icelandic, as I became more confident in the language and came to understand it better than I can speak it. I also benefited from assistance in Icelandic when necessary, on two occasions, with interviewees who did not speak a single word of English. Even though I, sometimes, did not understand everything completely in Icelandic, the process of transcription and careful re-listening enabled me to identify the key elements on which to base my subsequent analysis.



Overview of the corpus

The project adopts a mode of data production specific to anthropology, namely ethnographic fieldwork, which relies upon a qualitative methodology. The material collected constitutes what is referred to as the "corpus" (Olivier de Sardan, 1995). I used two standard forms of data production: interviews, which lie at the core of this project, and

participant observation, which complement them. Indeed, the research adopts a qualitative and participatory methodology based on audio recorded residents' testimonies. As Olivier de Sardan (1995 : 10) emphasizes,

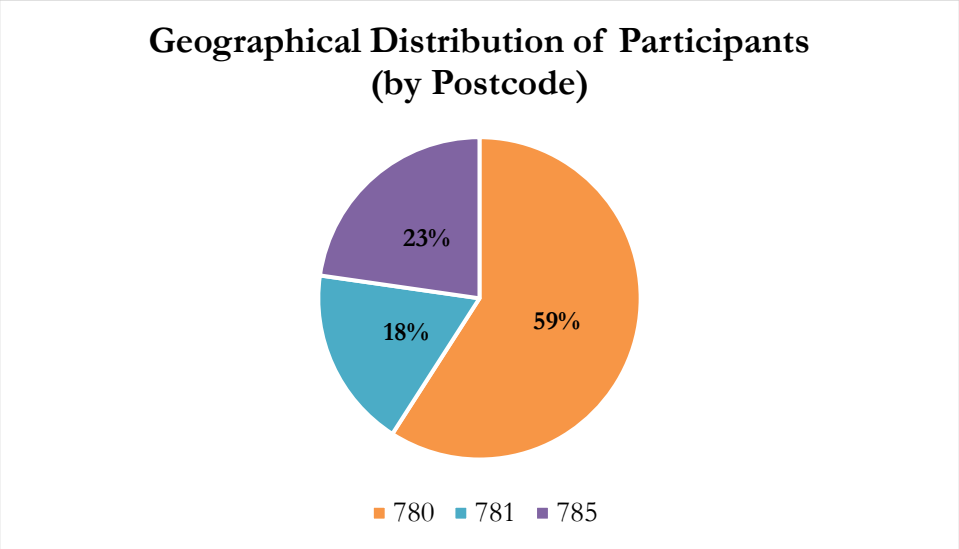
> "Data production by the researcher, based on the indigenous discourses he has himself solicited, remains a central element of field. (…) the representations of local actors are indispensable elements for social understanding. In a sense, the paramount ambition of anthropology is to provide the actor's point of view. The interview remains the preferred (…) mode of data production, one that is capable of producing discursive data opening access to indigenous, local representations. Notes obtained from the transcription of interviews are the mainstay of anthropological data."

Interviews

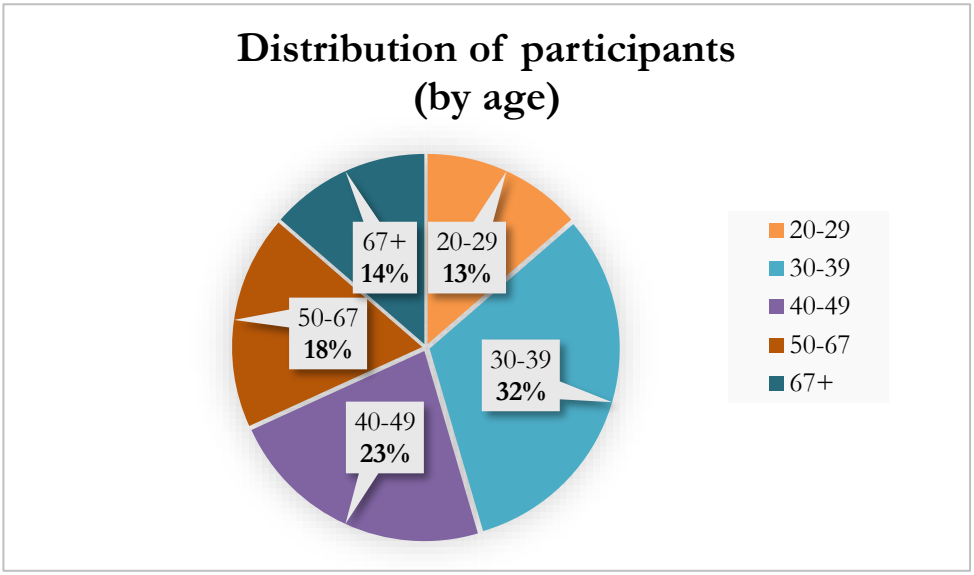
The corpus is based on twenty-two semi-structured open interviews, recorded with dated and signed consent (see Appendix 1), whose duration varies from one participant to another. The interview guide was prepared in both Icelandic and English (see Appendix 2), allowing participants to express themselves freely. Initially, I had envisaged short interviews, particularly insofar as I did not want to take too much of participants' time or inconvenience them, and I therefore imagined a simple and brief exchange. The first interviews lasted between 15 and 20 minutes; however, some interlocutors had much more to say and extended the discussions to 45 minutes or even one hour. In these cases, I moved beyond the interview guide in order to explore certain topics in greater depth, which made me realize how complex the subject ultimately was. The short and straightforward interview format I had initially envisioned proved to be unrealistic, unless I had been speaking with very reserved participants, which was rare, as those who agreed to take part clearly had things to say and showed an interest in questions related to language use.

Among the participants (whom I also refer to as informants), all three postal codes in the municipality are represented, with a predominance of residents from Höfn (780). This can be explained by the practicality of meetings made possible through geographical proximity, as well as by the more easily accessible networks of interpersonal acquaintance in Höfn, where I myself work. Nes, Mýrar, Lón, Suðursveit, and Öræfi remain rural areas whose social networks are less accessible to me, partly due to their geographical distance from Höfn, particularly in the case of Suðursveit and Öræfi which are the furthest areas in

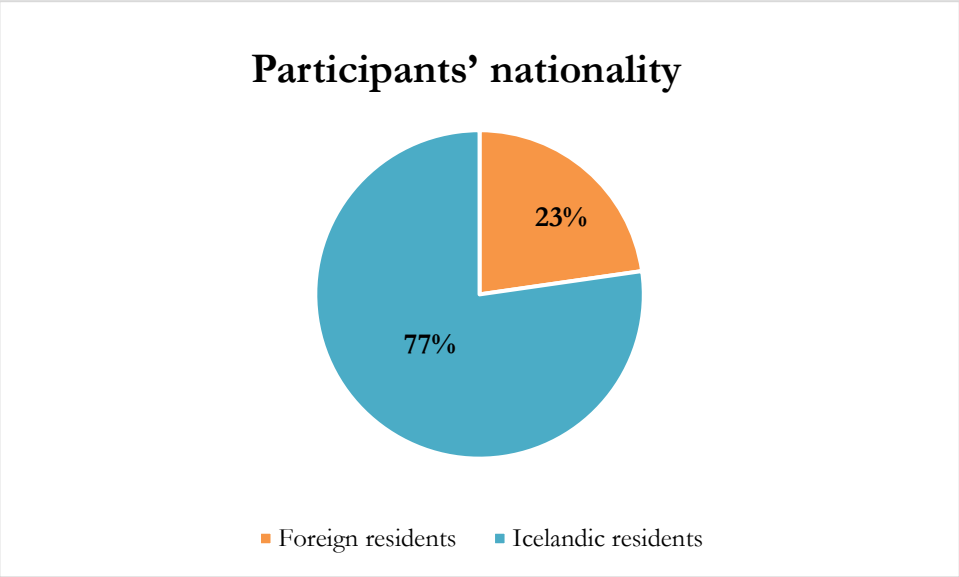
the municipality. I initially envisioned open recorded sessions where participants would come to me in public places such as Gamlabúð or the library, but I quickly realized that very few people attended such meetings, which required a reorientation of my fieldwork strategy towards greater mobility on my part. It appeared difficult to attract participants through open, public, and voluntary interview sessions held in Höfn. Residents from postal codes 781 and 785 were unlikely to travel to Höfn for such meetings. As a result, I had to adapt my methodological approach by going directly to participants, organizing private interviews, and meeting them in their own environments. For example, I went specifically to Öræfi on the 20th of July where I benefited from the assistance of a local resident for the organization of interviews on site. This spatial distance has undoubtedly a significant impact on my fieldwork: it highlights the methodological and practical constraints of conducting research within a limited time frame. The three-month duration of this research project constitutes a major limitation, especially in relation to the long-term immersion that characterizes usually anthropological fieldwork. I would have liked to explore rural areas in greater depth, as well as their experiences of language use, especially in Suðursveit and Öræfi, which are popular tourist destinations.



The sample covers a wide range of ages, from 24 to 90 years old, and includes slightly more women (13) than men (9).



The participants are both Icelandic and non-Icelandic nationals: I conducted interviews with five foreign residents compared to seventeen Icelandic residents.



However, I also had numerous informal exchanges, which contributed to enriching my data, particularly with foreign participants. During these three months of fieldwork, I realized that informal exchanges seemed to be the most appropriate mode of interaction with my interlocutors. Indeed, my long-term immersion in Iceland provided me with a form of embodied knowledge or understanding of Icelandic culture, and more specifically

of its relational norms, which are characterized by a high degree of spontaneity. Planned interactions (with scheduled appointments, fixed dates, times, and meeting places) appeared to me to be less in line with ordinary social practices in Iceland. In contrast, spontaneous exchanges, occurring in the flow of encounters, seemed more natural. Improvisation sometimes took precedence over organized and structured interviews, although these interactions were not part of the recorded data and therefore did not constitute formal testimonies.

Participant observation

Alongside interviews and informal exchanges, participant observation constitutes the guiding thread of this research – even its very essence, given my long-term presence in the field. The ethnographic material was, therefore, enriched by what Olivier de Sardan (1995) calls “insertion in the milieu”. Indeed, my settlement in Hornafjörður (including my daily life, my social environment and my work) enabled observation, which allowed me to complement and deepen the analysis of the data collected during the interviews. This form of ethnographic engagement can also be understood in terms of what Olivier de Sardan (1995) refers to as “immersion”:

> “This sociological or ethnographic “immersion” constitutes simultaneously the context of data production and a very particular mode of data production. In fact, the information and knowledge acquired can, on the one hand, be systematically recorded by the researcher, who takes advantage of his presence on the spot to interview, observe, note, count... On the other hand, knowledge and information may remain abstract or latent, being, as it were, “incorporated” in the researcher’s presence, through his memory, perceptions, affects, unconscious. (…) The researcher is in fact continuously (…) engaged in simple or complex verbal and non-verbal social relationships: conversations, chats, games, etiquette, solicitations, etc. (…) [T]hey play an indirect but important role in "familiarizing" the anthropologist with the local culture, in enabling him to effortlessly decode other people’s actions and reactions.”

I was able to implement this immersion during the three summer months as well, notably through my work at Gamlabúð (information and cultural centre in Höfn) and my daily interactions with both Icelandic and foreign visitors. It was particularly interesting and enriching for this research to observe how Icelandic visitors address me without knowing whether I am an Icelandic speaker, and how these interactions unfold from a linguistic perspective. I will return to this point later in the analysis.

Implementation and process

First of all, I relied on a combination of dissemination channels for introducing myself and presenting my project. In order to reach potential participants, I wrote an article in Icelandic for the local newspaper *Eystrahorn*[1] in early June, which was also published on the municipality's website [2] and then shared on its Facebook page.

ÍSLENSKA EÐA ENSKA?

Aðsend grein: Eugénie Parent / Jenný

Ég heiti Eugénie, en ég er kölluð Jenný. Ég hef búið á Höfn í þrjú ár og er í fjarnámi í mannfræði á meistarastigi. Ég hef nýlega hlotið styrk úr Nýsköpunarsjóði námsmanna til að vinna að rannsóknarverkefni á Höfn í sumar, undir leiðsögn Menningarmiðstöðvar Hornafjarðar.

Við vitum öll að Sveitarfélagið Hornafjörður gengur í gegnum verulegar lýðfræðilegar breytingar sem tengjast ferðaþjónustu og vinnumarkaðstengdum fólksflutningum. Í þessu samhengi hefur vaxandi fjöldi erlendra íbúa haft áhrif á daglega málnotkun, sérstaklega með aukinni notkun ensku samhliða íslensku.

Íslenska hefur lengi verið talin einn af hornsteinum þjóðarvitundar. Hins vegar hefur aukin notkun og nærvera ensku, í samhengi sem mótast af ferðaþjónustu, orðið að verulegri áskorun á Íslandi og vakið áhyggjur af mögulegum menningarlegum yfirburðum hennar. Mikilvægt er að vekja athygli á þessum áhyggjum svo hægt sé að velta þeim fyrir sér saman.

Þegar ég kom fyrst til Íslands upplifði ég notkun ensku sem mjög jákvæða, þar sem hún auðveldaði mér samskipti og aðlögun. Með tímanum varð ég þó sífellt meðvitaðri um staðbundnar áhyggjur af vaxandi notkun ensku. Þessi breyting vakti áhuga minn á efninu og hvatti mig til að skilja það betur.

Markmið verkefnis míns er að öðlast betri skilning á því hvernig þessi tvö tungumál lifa saman og hvernig þessi staða getur haft áhrif á tilfinningu heimamanna (Íslendinga) fyrir því að tilheyra samfélaginu. Til þess mun ég safna og skrá frásagnir bæði frá íslenskum og erlendum íbúum, til að varpa ljósi á staðbundin viðhorf og upplifanir af þessum breytingum.

Ég mun taka opin viðtöl, bæði einstaklingsviðtöl og viðtöl á sérstökum upptökufundum í Gömlubúð. Markmiðið er að draga fram togstreitu, áskoranir og daglega reynslu fólks af tungumálanotkun.

Með þátttöku íbúa verður verkefnið beintengt Sveitarfélaginu Hornafirði. Það miðar að því að efla umræðu á staðnum, hjálpa til við að greina möguleg úrbótasvið, bæði hvað varðar verndun íslenskunnar og aðlögun innflytjenda, og styðja við framtíðarverkefni.

Samantektarskýrsla verður lögð fram fyrir sveitarfélagið og haldin verður opin kynning á frásögnum, með umræðum í kjölfarið sem stuðla að sameiginlegri ígrundun. Verkefnið hefur einnig þýðingu á landsvísu, þar sem aukin nærvera ensku vekur spurningar víða um land í samhengi við vaxandi ferðaþjónustu og gæti því nýst öðrum sveitarfélögum.

Ég vil því bjóða íbúum hjartanlega velkomna að taka þátt í verkefninu með því að deila reynslu sinni og sjónarmiðum. Fyrsta tækifærið til þátttöku verður föstudaginn 19. júní og verður hægt að koma hvenær sem er milli klukkan 17:30 og 19:30 í Gömlubúð, þar sem ég mun taka upp frásagnir í notalegu og óformlegu umhverfi.

Allir eru velkomnir! Ef þú hefur áhuga en kemst ekki á þessum tíma, endilega hafðu samband svo við getum fundið annan tíma til þátttöku.

My article presenting the project in the June issue of *Eystrahorn* © 5. tbl. Eystrahorns 2026

[1] See online : https://eystrahorn.is/islenska-eda-enska/

[2] See online : https://www.hornafjordur.is/frettir/malnotkun-i-ferdathjonustumotudu-samhengi-rannsoknarverkefni-um-islensku-ensku-og-samfelag-i-sveitarfelaginu-hornafirdi

Once I had completed the consent form and the interview guide (see Appendix 1 and 2), I created an advertisement using Canva – both in Icelandic and English – to announce an open recording session for first interviews, which took place on 19 June at Gamlabúð. A Facebook event was created and shared across multiple online groups that are well-known and used within the community of Hornafjörður. The interviews were conducted in an open-ended format, which offered a high degree of flexibility; however, as mentioned previously, only three participants attended this first trial session.

Social media advertisement for the first recording session © Eugénie Parent

Social media advertisement for the first recording session © Eugénie Parent

A few days later on 20 June, I went to Nýheimar, a central workplace in Höfn that brings together numerous offices: those of the municipal cultural centre (Menningarmiðstöð Hornafjarðar), the Knowledge Center, the Natural Science Institute of Iceland, the Vatnajökull National Park, as well as the high school FÁS, among others. I set up in the central hall with my recording equipment during the lunch break, made my presence known, and even went to knock on some offices myself to invite people to come and speak with me about the research project if they had the time and willingness. It was during these interviews at Nýheimar that I realised that conversations could extend well beyond my initial interview guide and the 15 - 20 minutes I had originally envisaged.

Another open recording session for interviews was held at the Höfn library, where the Senior Citizens Association (Félag eldri Hornfirðinga) had been asked to disseminate the information to its members. However, only one person attended, which allows for several possible interpretations. The first, which was in fact suggested by the association, is that people “are on the move like never before,” as it is the peak of summer. The second once again highlights the difficulty of asking people to come on a voluntary basis for a project with which they may feel either intimidated or simply uninterested, particularly when approached by a foreign student like me. This experience made me realize that this method was not effective. Thus, I readjusted my approach and began engaging more fully in an

ethnographic way: building relationships beyond my personal social circle, opening new doors, in a sense sowing seeds, taking notes on informal exchanges and observations, and organizing interviews gradually, in different locations, one by one. I conducted only one final organized session in Öræfi, specifically in Skaftafell, in the cafeteria of the Visitor Center on 20 July 2026, with the help of a local resident. Grouping the encounters and interviews there was essential given the distance, approximately 120 km from Höfn.

Recording session at Nýheimar, 22nd of June © Eugénie Parent

On 14 September, I organized a public presentation of this research at Gamlabúð. I created a visual poster using Canva, which was published as a full A4 page in the local newspaper *Eystrahorn* at the beginning of September and also used for the Facebook event created for this occasion. An invitation was sent to all participants in the research. Kristín Vala, my supervisor, also sent the invitation by email, together with this advertisement, to various members of the municipality, including the mayor and members of the cultural committee, none of whom attended. Nevertheless, 12 people, including three of my informants, were present and showed interest in the topic. They also encouraged me to continue this research further, which they considered important for both the local community and Iceland more broadly. During the event, selected excerpts from the interviews were printed and displayed on the walls of Gamlabúð, in order to make the presentation more engaging, accessible, and dynamic, in line with the participatory approach of the project.

Set-up for my presentation at Gamlabúð, 14 September 2026 © Eugénie Parent

Set-up for my presentation at Gamlabúð, 14 September 2026 © Eugénie Parent

Public presentation at Gamlabúð, 14 September 2026 © Eugénie Parent

Social media and *Eystrahorn* advertisement for the presentation of my research © Eugénie Parent

ANALYSIS – DISCUSSION

The data collected through the interviews amounts to approximately 12 hours of recordings which, as one might expect, are rich in information to explore and analyze.
The ethnographic material highlights ambivalent relationships to the English language, both nuanced and marked also by tensions. The only clear outcome of this research is precisely the one that confirms the initial hypothesis regarding the complexity of the issue under study. From an anthropological perspective, linguistic practices are inherently complex. However, it was clear that English is, indeed, widely and increasingly used from my informants' responses.

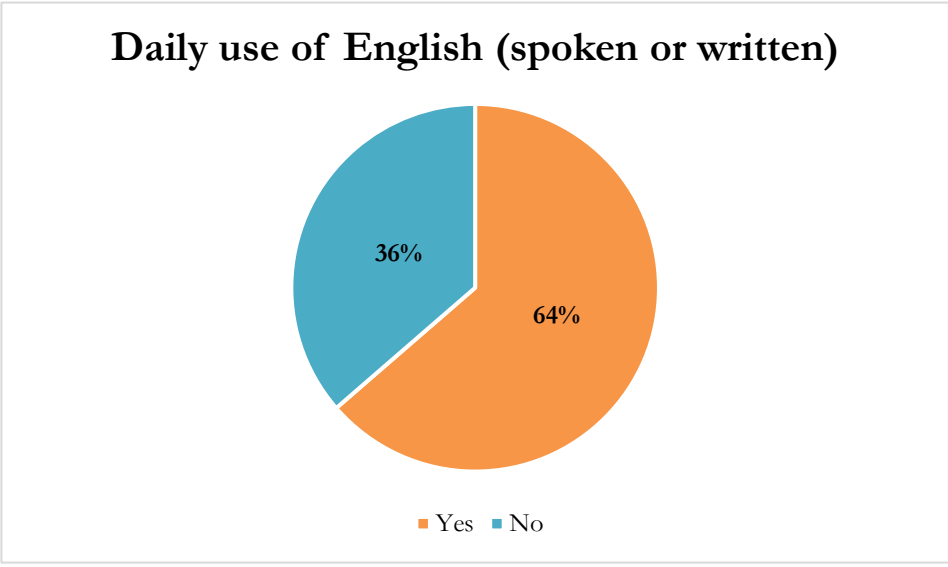
Before moving into this first part and exploring the effects of the growing presence of English in society, it is important to note that the issue of the anglicization of Icelandic is not the focus of this research, although it remains an important topic widely raised by my interlocutors. A recurring concern I collected relates to slang (*sletta*) and linguistic blending. It was repeatedly pointed out to me that English is increasingly used by younger Icelandic generations, including outside of any interaction with non-Icelandic speakers. Likely under the influence of media, digital content, and more broadly Anglo-American culture, some young people tend to incorporate English into their everyday practices, sometimes even interacting with one another in this language, as I was occasionally able to observe during my walks in public spaces. I found that this phenomenon gives rise to both concern and a certain degree of irritation, particularly among Icelandic parents, who witness evolving language practices among children and adolescents. These observations help to avoid a mono-causal interpretation of the growing use of English in Iceland, by situating it within broader dynamics of globalization rather than explaining it solely through the presence of foreign populations – although this latter dimension, itself an expression of globalization, remains the primary focus of this research.

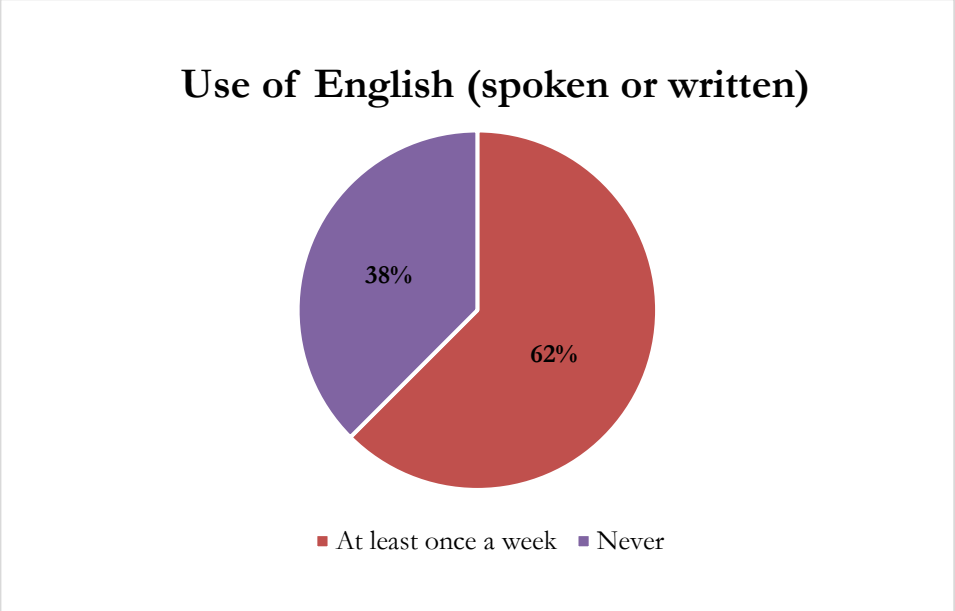
The growing use of English and its implications

Is a linguistic norm being challenged?

When asked whether there are any places or situations where they use English more than Icelandic, participants mainly referred to service jobs, especially front-desk interactions such as petrol stations, restaurants, supermarkets, and hotels. However, English is also widely used in the workplace, even in jobs that do not, in principle, require daily use of English as part of professional activities, beyond sectors such as tourism or internationally oriented positions (e.g. sales, import/export). As an illustration, one participant explained: "Basically, it's simple: I use English every day, at least once at work. There is not a single day when I don't speak English." Further clarification was provided: English use in the workplace had become necessary following the arrival of a new employee of Polish origin who, although having lived in Iceland for three years, does not speak Icelandic. I also collected similar accounts explaining that the presence of foreign colleagues in the workplace often requires the daily use of English.

Thus, 64% of my interviewees reported using English daily. Among the remaining 36% who do not use English on a daily basis, most still use it at least once a week, either at work or when going out (i.e., outside their homes) in some of the places mentioned above. In my sample, those who do not use English at all are all from the 67+ age group, which seems to highlight a generational pattern.





This supports the hypothesis that English is widely and increasingly used. From my analysis, this appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon, which is also explicitly expressed by one participant: "Maybe I am a bit too old to understand, but I find that these changes have happened so quickly; five years ago, it was not like this." The "like this" this participant refers to corresponds to what is described as "new rules" (*nýjar reglur*). The informant also uses the term *normið* ("the norm"), suggesting that the linguistic practices experienced are forming a new linguistic norm. This perception of rapid transformation reinforces the idea of a rupture between what may have been a previous state of linguistic practices and their current configuration. These remarks directly echo the anecdote mentioned at the beginning of this work (introduction), in which my Icelandic friend exclaimed: "it's really the world upside down!" In both cases, it seems that it is not necessarily the presence and use of English (or other foreign languages, for that matter) that appears to be problematic but rather the need to shift one's language of interaction in one's own country, within certain spaces of interaction. This "linguistic adaptation" performed by Icelandic speakers seems to contribute to a sense of mismatch between what "should be" and what is experienced.

Tensions, frustrations and issues of belonging

Because testimonies that I collected highlight a growing sense of an inability to communicate in Icelandic in some places or spaces mentioned above, it is sometimes experienced as "*leiðinlegt*" (tedious, annoying). The feeling "to be annoyed" is to be linked with the increasing frequence of English interactions in the municipality. These interactions in which English is used rather than Icelandic are not rare or isolated case. As a result, frustration and irritation are expressed and often deeply felt, as some participants emphasize: "I don't feel good with this[1]" or "I find this a bit upside down[2]".

Furthermore, I noted the use of a lexical field of otherness and difference to describe these English-language interactions. There is a feeling of becoming "disabled, handicaped[3]" and even "foreign" in some familiar spaces: "In fact, I feel like I am the foreigner." Feeling like a foreigner in one's own country only constitutes a perception of the reality experienced by some of the interviewed residents. This reversal of position highlights how linguistic practices contribute to shaping lived experiences of identity. However, this is important to insist on what follows: these feelings don't refer to the presence of foreigners (either tourists or immigrants) but to the perception of loosing gradually the Icelandic language in certain interactions in certain places.

This led me to question how the language used in interactions may contribute to construct group categorizations. On many occasions, the pronoun "we" (*við*) was used during interviews, as well as the expression *hjá okkur* (which I do struggle to translate properly in English – "at our place/home"). I wonder whether Icelandic language becomes a classificatory tool, distinguishing those who speak Icelandic ("we") from those with whom this language can no longer be used in interaction ("they"), regardless of the other languages used. When interviewees refer to feeling like a "foreigner" in some everyday spaces due to not hearing or being able to use Icelandic, they suggest that native Icelandic speakers themselves may come to perceive marginalization within their own environment. Once again, from my analysis, these statements do not indicate a direct rejection of English as such but rather point to its dominant position in relation to Icelandic (and I insist on "in

[1] „Mér líður ekki vel með það" – interview recorded on 10/07/2026.
[2] „Mér finnst þetta svolítið öfugsnúið" – – interview recorded on 19/06/2026.
[3] „Mér líður eins og ég sé bara fatlaður þegar ég get ekki skilið ensku þegar allir aðrir skilja" – interview recorded on 20/07/2026.

relation to"), which may lead to a sense of linguistic devaluation of Icelandic. For instance, the case of Vík was mentioned several times, often with expressions of great concern. I was told that there is hope that "this will never happen in Hornafjörður," with reminders that "Icelandic is still, after all, the official language of the country."

If the focus of this research was first strongly oriented towards the place and use of English in the municipality/society of Hornafjörður, it is its relative position to Icelandic that must be questioned eventually and perhaps, first and foremost, the value of Icelandic itself. Indeed, what kind of value, or symbolic capital (Bourdieu), is attributed to the Icelandic language? What value is given to Icelandic in Icelandic society, and how is this value constructed in relation to English? In this sense, and as a consequence, I collected testimonies indicating that it is important to remain focused on Icelandic: "we need to be careful with our language. We need to take care of our language.[1]"

[1] "Við þurfum aðeins að gæta að tungunni okkar. Passa upp á tunguna okkar." – interview recorded on 10/07/2026.

A more nuanced view on the coexistence of Icelandic and English

New embodied linguistic practices?

I also collected more nuanced testimonies, reflecting rather indifferent attitudes towards the growing presence of English. In fact, this seems to align with the idea of a perceived "new linguistic norm", mentioned above. Rather than expressing irritation or frustration in response to the rapid transformation of "the local linguistic landscape" and the rise of new linguistic forms of interaction in certain spaces, what emerges instead is a more neutral perspective.

The participants' testimonies, which suggest that they are not disturbed by the growing use of English, seem to highlight the mainly practical nature of English: "it's a practical language, it's a means of communication in order to understand each other." This is why I mobilize the concept of English as a *lingua franca*, that is, a common language which is neither the native language nor the official language of the interlocutors involved in interaction this research is focusing on. Indeed, English is neither the language of one group (Icelanders) nor of the other (migrant populations and tourists, with some exceptions), but rather a common language (hence the notion of *lingua franca*) adopted by both parties. Migrant and tourist populations, who do not speak Icelandic, are not imposing their own native languages, but instead use a "third" language. Thus, English is not, in principle, perceived as a threat to identity.

Hence, my data also show a form of indifference or neutrality when participants are asked how they feel about, or evaluate, these linguistic changes. In line with the many "it doesn't bother me at all" responses collected, one interviewee states:

> "Of course I want to preserve Icelandic. But I don't see why the two languages couldn't live side by side. I don't necessarily see it as something negative, but I wouldn't necessarily call it something positive either.[1]"

[1] Interview recorded in English on 22/06/2026.

In a way, I perceive it as if this linguistic situation has simply become the way things are. People adapt to it, or accept it, as "the new norm". It can be described as a form of habituation to language switching, particularly obvious in some specific places (such as, service jobs, already mentioned above). Situations of interaction observed are illustrative and relevant. Without necessarily thinking about it explicitly, but having somehow internalized it, Icelandic native speakers tend to, either:

- assume whether the person they are addressing speaks Icelandic or not (which raises questions in terms of discrimination, bias or even racism);
- start directly in English depending on the context of the interaction: suggesting an embodied knowledge of where English is expected to be use - particularly in the types of places mentioned earlier (service jobs), where staff are often not Icelandic speakers, pointing to a form of spatial division structured by language use;
- begin by asking which language to use: "Icelandic or English?" or *"Talar þú íslensku?"*;
- or start in Icelandic while remaining aware and ready to switch if the interlocutor's response suggests an accent or limited proficiency.

Some participants explain they can switch between Icelandic and English without really thinking about it, quite naturally and without any sense of frustration. They describe this as almost automatic. From my analysis, it has become an embodied habit, an internalized and "normal" practice. This is where the complexity of the issue emerges, as a paradox appears: on the one hand, the increasing use of English in interactions is such that switching from one language to another becomes almost automatic. Hence, it is, in some ways, perceived as a normal habit that could be described as a new linguistic practice or an embodied linguistic knowledge. On the other hand, precisely because it is experienced as a new or recent linguistic practice, it stands in contrast to what is still – at the same time – perceived also as normal, that is, Icelandic should be the primary language used in interaction.

This situation raises questions about the forms of bilingualism in Iceland which will be explored in the following section. I approach bilingualism here as a situation in which two languages coexist and are used in practice, without (and I insist on this point) implying that they are necessarily equally mastered by all speakers.

Has bilingualism become part of Icelandic culture?

Interestingly, even though the language is strongly emphasized in the theoretical literature (see introduction) as a pilar of national identity, it was rarely mentioned – at first – when participants were asked what makes them feel Icelandic, or how they define Icelandic identity. In many cases, it was either not mentioned at all or appeared only later, following initial responses such as the land, a mindset of resilience, or the experience of living in harsh and remote conditions. Despite the frustrations that are sometimes expressed, most Icelanders nonetheless demonstrate a high level of proficiency in English. As one participant emphasizes it: "I am proud how proficient Icelanders are in English compared to some many nations in the world." To a greater extent, another participant even expressed how uncomfortable it would be not to know English[1].

It led me to question whether English proficiency has become part of Icelandic culture. This high level of proficiency, combined with the automatic switching between Icelandic and English, provides an interesting perspective on bilingualism and on a potentially evolving Icelandic identity. It may be seen as a distinctive feature, setting Iceland apart from other nations. In this regard, the fact that having a good command of English is nowadays perceived as "normal" in Iceland can also generate a reverse effect: some participants report feeling very annoyed when travelling abroad to countries where English is barely spoken. As if, because English proficiency is considered "normal" in Iceland, it is expected to be the same elsewhere. Becoming aware of these differences may precisely contribute to framing Icelandic bilingualism as a cultural feature.

English also appears, in contrast to some of the frustrations and concerns expressed, to be valued and sometimes even preferred over Icelandic:

> "When I was a teenager, me and my friends - all Icelanders - , we would just talk in English to each other. English is just a lot more modern, lots of things in Icelandic can just be kind of archaic. And there're a lot of words in English that don't really exist directly in Icelandic.[2]"

[1] „Ég nota miklu meirq íslensku en ég þarf samt oft að grípa á ensku. Það væri óþægilegt að kunna ekki ensku." – entretien enregistré le 07/08/2026.

[2] Interview recorded in English on 21/07/26.

Several informants explained that it's sometimes simply "much more convenient" to use English. Another participant added:

> "Unless I am speaking with a family member or something, there is a 50% chance that I will have to speak English anyway in Iceland.[1]"

This perceived linguistic reality (whether it generates concern and dissatisfaction or not) does not appear to be something that can be ignored in Hornafjörður and more broadly, in Iceland, although this would require further research. Would that imply a redefinition of national identity, moving away from a purist linguistic collective imagination? It also raises, it seems to me, the question of representation versus reality in Iceland: is there a significant gap between lived reality and discursive representations of the country?

Foreign residents' perspective: English seen as vital

In this final section, I will discuss how foreign residents perceive the linguistic situation in the municipality, which reveals an important dimension to consider for a broader understanding of the complexity of the issue.

From the perspective of foreign residents, English often appears as a necessary step before engaging with Icelandic. Many describe prioritizing English first, as it is seen as useful - even essential - for everyday life, while Icelandic is perceived as less immediately necessary. This is also linked to uncertainty about staying in Iceland: some participants question whether it is worth investing time, money, and effort into learning Icelandic if their stay may be temporary. This aspect raises the question of the nature of immigration in Iceland, which does not appear to be – at first – a settlement-based immigration. Many informal exchanges revealed relatively long durations of residence in Iceland (three, four, sometimes five years), yet when asked, my informants still expressed doubts about whether they would remain in the country or leave. This issue would be worth further exploration. As a result, Icelandic tends to be viewed less as a vital language for daily communication, and more as a marker of integration - something that becomes relevant over time. In this regard, the two languages are perceived very differently: English as a practical and

[1] Interview recorded in English 21/07/2026.

necessary tool, and Icelandic as a longer-term investment, closely tied to belonging and integration.

To understand these different perceptions of the two languages from immigrants, it is important to recall a key point which echoes, in a way, the previous section on bilingualism. Most immigrants do not have English as their native language; therefore, there is considerable variation in English proficiency among immigrant populations. In many cases, English proficiency is either very limited or non-existent (compared to Icelanders). Thus, English becomes a priority for these individuals, in the sense that they experience a need, or even an obligation, to learn, improve, and practice English first, not because they do not wish to learn Icelandic, but because, as one participant stated, "you cannot survive without knowing English in Iceland." To a broader extent, English becomes essential not only for communication, but also as a prerequisite for learning Icelandic. I encountered several immigrants who explained that they needed to acquire a sufficient command of English before enrolling in an Icelandic course, as Icelandic is taught through English. This raises the difficulty of learning a foreign language through another foreign language, rather than through one's mother tongue. In rural areas such as Hornafjörður, this is not even an option, as it is not possible to find, for instance, Spanish-Icelandic, French-Icelandic, Greek-Icelandic, or Romanian-Icelandic teachers, or any similar language combinations. This question also resonates at the national level in this context of expanding tourism and labor migration across Iceland.

CONCLUSION

It is now time to conclude. While analyzing the collected data and writing this academic report, many reflections have emerged. This has, at times, been somewhat overwhelming, as the material revealed a level of complexity that I had not fully anticipated, exposing an intricate entanglement of issues, dynamics, and questions. Thus, the elements discussed in this essay have only been partially explored, given the time available. However, they constitute a fruitful opening for future research. This coming autumn, marked by my return to university, will allow for distance and reflection. Over the past weeks, a strong desire to continue this project has emerged: the topic would clearly benefit from further development, potentially extending the fieldwork to additional sites. I intend to reflect on the different possibilities available to pursue this research and probably to continue enriching my ethnographic material through new observations.

I hope that this research will provide the municipality of Hornafjörður with qualitative material to support local reflection, while also contributing to wider discussions on language, identity, and tourism in Iceland. As indicated in my funding application, the material may be used for an exhibition at Gamlabúð, a cultural space and tourist information centre in Höfn, in order to make ongoing language-related challenges visible and to convey local lived realities to both residents and visitors. In order to do so, I draw on a concept developed by the French geographer Rémy Knafou[1], which resonates with the cultural and social issues raised by linguistic practices in the municipality. This concept, known as “reflexive tourism” refers to an awareness an awareness by tourists themselves of the issues raised by current global touristic practices. “Reflexive tourism” is a concept that aims to create an in-depth experience of elsewhere, by mobilizing each person’s capacity to question themselves, to question their holiday practices.

For instance, this research could serve as a basis for developing a project of reflexive tourism. It could help convey local lived experiences regarding linguistic practices, in order to raise awareness among tourism actors, including tourists, and to encourage reflection. Reflexive tourism requires paying sufficient attention to how local populations feel, which this research intended to do. Of course, tourism growth can be highly beneficial

[1] Rémy Knafou, 2017.

for regions. But too often, it occurs without any consideration of its impacts. Frequently, the main impact taken into account is the environmental one, while the social and cultural impacts on host societies are rarely reflected upon. For this reason, I consider this research to be a modest but meaningful contribution to ongoing discussions on overtourism and migration, and their interlinked effects on language use in Iceland. Rémy Knafou also refers to the notion of the "welcoming territory" (as opposed to the attractive territory) as a place organized to be open to the greatest number, to give meaning to those who live there as well as to those who visit it and stay there temporarily. Such a territory may construct a new form of discourse in interaction with both resident and transient populations, and thus create the conditions for its adaptation to future social and spatial transformations[1]. More concretely, this idea could be implemented through the selection of quotes from the interviews, printed and displayed on the walls as I already did during my public presentation on 14 September at Gamlabùð. This could serve as a basis for a more immersive and participatory installation, including audio recordings of selected interview passages that could be read aloud by members of the Höfn theatre group in order to preserve anonymity. This approach would allow for a more experiential engagement with residents' perspectives on language use, while also offering a more accessible and sensory form of dissemination of the research findings.

As a conclusion I will quote Remy Knafou himself:

> "Every place has a capacity to challenge both its inhabitants and its visitors, which must be identified through a specific diagnosis, serving one objective: to better understand the places we visit, but also to better reflect on ourselves and take responsibility, aware of being part of the world-system.[2]"

[1] See online : https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/le-tourisme-reflexif-un-point-detape/, accessed on 04/09/2026.

[2] *Ibid.*

Work in progress

APPENDIX 1 – Consent form

APPENDIX 2 – Interview Guide

REFERENCES